

Product Support: Demand Value, Not Just Discounts

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Vendor bashing and aggressive procurement practices, while often therapeutic, are unlikely to reduce the total cost of support significantly. Organizations that focus solely on price negotiations for product support services are unlikely to realize the maximum benefits possible. However, there are many ways to reduce the total costs associated with the provision of technical support and any related failures. Organizations that make best use of their contracted support offerings are likely to have a lower total cost of support than their peers and will be better placed to drive their service providers to deliver even more value.

Key Findings

- The total cost of support is typically far greater than the annual support premium. Organizations that work to drive down the total cost of support will save far more than any discount they are likely to negotiate with a support provider. Reducing the total cost of support requires concerted action on a variety of fronts. While end-user organizations can do a lot by themselves, their success may be limited if they do not work with their support providers.
- Customer pressure on its own is unlikely to change the product support market overnight. But it will help provide momentum and reassurance to the minority of vendors that are currently investing in proactive and predictive support service improvements.
- Gartner has identified and defined four categories of product support service called Reactive, Proactive, Predictive and Pre-emptive. The collective name for the relative positioning of these four classifications of service offering is the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale. Gartner estimates that the vast majority (between 85% and 90%) of current support service offerings are primarily reactive.
- Current support offerings often claim to be proactive when, in fact, they are little more than reactive services with a passive set of additional functionalities tagged onto the side. One of the objectives of the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale is to bring a consistent set of definitions to the market to enable side-by-side service comparisons.
- Many organizations are unaware of the scope and types of support services they are entitled to as part of their support contracts. This general level of ignorance has resulted in apathy on both sides of the customer-provider relationship. Organizations must push their providers, while recognizing that they themselves have work to do too.

Recommendations

- Get someone from an unrelated technical discipline in the IT function to review existing support arrangements and identify opportunities to leverage vendor offerings more

effectively. Many people have assumed (sometimes wrongly) that their support providers haven't improved their service offerings in many years.

- Calculate the total cost of support for your business-critical systems and infrastructure first. Do not worry too much about being exact; a rough order of magnitude estimate should be sufficient to identify the first wave of opportunities for improvement.
- Focus your support spending more appropriately on those areas that really impact the business. Request varying service-level agreements (SLAs) for different types of systems and define the operational periods when you require peak coverage.
- Challenge your support providers to add value to your business. Explain that you are interested in making the best use of the services that you have contracted for. Request concrete examples of how and when they will help you address all the key support value drivers.
- Ask your support providers to describe their service offerings in terms of the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale and give an indication of the financial and business benefits that one service offers over another.
- Require your technical functions to review vendor provided best-practice guidance and explain why it won't work in your environment and/or why it won't save you money. If they are unable to do so, implement it. If they can, go back to the support provider and debunk its claims.
- Aggressively look to reduce the internal costs of system maintenance whenever possible. Enlist your support service providers to help with this challenge. Remember, your own internal support staff may have a vested interest in not changing the current situation.

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ANALYSIS

For many organizations, support is no longer the unquestioned budget item it once was. Where channel partners are present or the underlying technology is sufficiently mature or open, then there are typically numerous support options available. These options include the use of alternative service providers, leveraging peer-to-peer communities, self-support or the "no support" option. As operational costs continue to come under increased scrutiny, support spending is one area in which many organizations are looking to make significant savings. This focus on cost rather than value may be somewhat shortsighted, as the support industry does offer significant value. Whether it can convince its customers of this value remains to be seen.

Applying pressure at a point where there is little or no flexibility will invariably do little more than increase the internal pressure of all concerned. Organizations should remember that the support organizations that they deal with seldom have the commercial flexibility to offer discounts, irrespective of how hard they press. However, they may have internal resources that can be leveraged on your behalf.

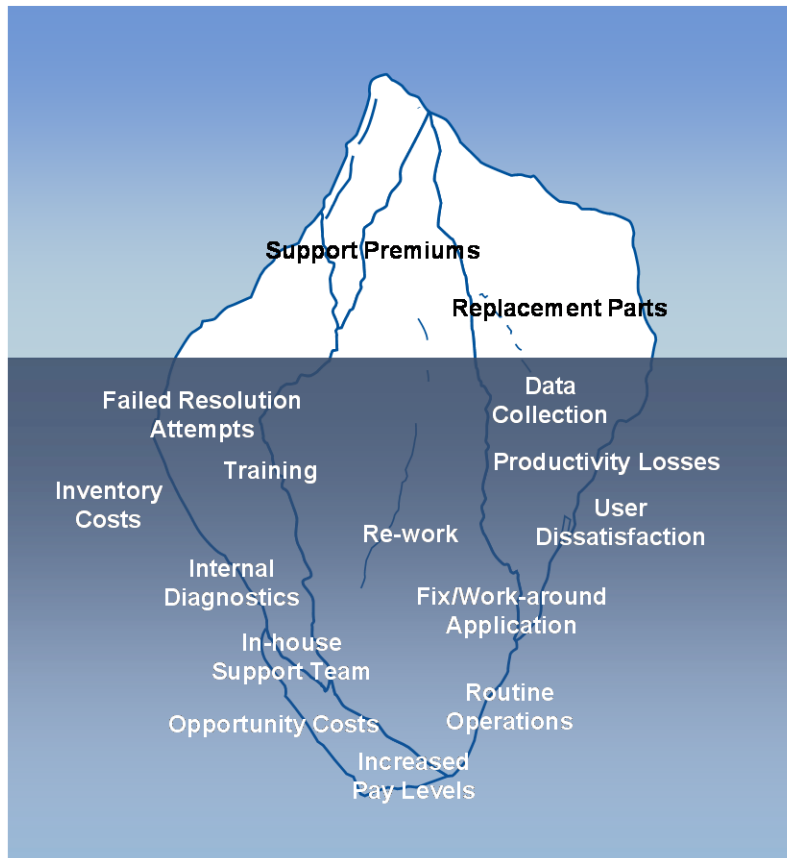
Organizations looking to reduce their support-related spending are advised to consider the indirect, as well as the direct, costs of support. Service providers have a role to play in the reduction of the total cost of support; however organizations must also play their part if they are to successfully minimize costs.

This document describes the various factors that combine to make up the total cost of support; it also defines Gartner's Product Support Maturity Scale and outlines how organizations may use this model as part of a concerted effort to reduce support-related costs.

1.0 Background and Context

The costs associated with product support extend much farther than the annual renewal fee and the cost of replacement parts. However, many organizations fail to take this into consideration when they evaluate their support spending. Even mature organizations that actively track the total cost of ownership (TCO) associated with key pieces of their physical and logical infrastructure often neglect to include all the direct and indirect costs associated with supporting a system or device. Figure 1 shows how the total cost of support consists of numerous elements, many of which are difficult to assign a definitive value to.

Figure 1. The Total Cost of Support



Source: Gartner (February 2010)

At a theoretical level, Information Technology Infrastructure Library processes, such as incident management, problem management and financial management, should be useful in helping to identify the costs associated with system failures or performance degradations, as well as the ongoing operational costs. However, most real-life implementations of these processes fail to address the calculation and capture of the cost of failure comprehensively, with many not even attempting to determine such data.

Philip Crosby (the renowned American Quality Management guru) advocated in the 1950s that the cost of quality, that is, the costs associated with not doing the job right the first time, were typically in the region of 20% to 25% of sales revenue. Crosby suggested that a well-managed organization could realistically expect to reduce this to something like 2.5%. Given the current level of management and process maturity within the IT industry, it is likely that a ratio of 1.5- to 2.5-to-1 of internal-support-related costs to external support fees is probable for corporate solutions and hardware within many organizations, with this ratio rising to nearer 3.5-to-1 for complex enterprisewide implementations. In other words, for every dollar paid to a vendor for support, another 2.5 or more are likely to be spent internally on support-related activities or the consequences of support failure.

So, the benefits of reducing the total cost of support are clear. Service providers that actively address the total cost issue will have far fewer customers questioning the value of their services. In the short to medium term, it is anticipated that vendors will be able to differentiate themselves based on their ability to reduce the total cost of support alone. Consequently, it was the reduction

of the internal costs of maintenance that Gartner selected to be the first marketing theme discussed within its research note titled "Marketing Essentials: How to Convincingly Articulate the Product Support Value Proposition." The following list outlines the key themes that were identified:

- Reducing the internal cost of maintenance
- Promoting prevention-based approaches
- Improving efficiency/reducing the level of resource use
- Making the solution/product deliver more value
- Reducing configuration/enhancement costs
- Driving end-user satisfaction

However, the total cost of maintenance can be reduced only so far before other aspects come into play. To minimize maintenance-related costs fully, it is necessary to embrace prevention-based approaches and address the other themes highlighted above, such as improving operational efficiency.

THE GARTNER PRODUCT SUPPORT MATURITY SCALE

2.0 A Definition

The Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale is a qualitative mechanism for determining the relative maturity of a specific support offering by evaluating its attributes and resultant performance or outputs against 10 key service characteristics or evaluation criteria.

The maturity scale has been split into four segmentations, which are defined as reactive, proactive, predictive and pre-emptive, with reactive services being the least mature (but most widely available) and pre-emptive services being the most mature (but not currently available). The evaluation criteria, which are defined in greater detail later in this document, are as follows:

- Incident focus
- Prevention focus
- Interaction focus
- Service metrics
- SLA penalties
- Level of analytics
- Automation deployed
- Nature of relationship
- Level of customer involvement
- Value improvements delivered

Table 1 outlines the key evaluation criteria and shows how service offerings within each of the four segmentations would perform against the criteria.

Table 1. Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale

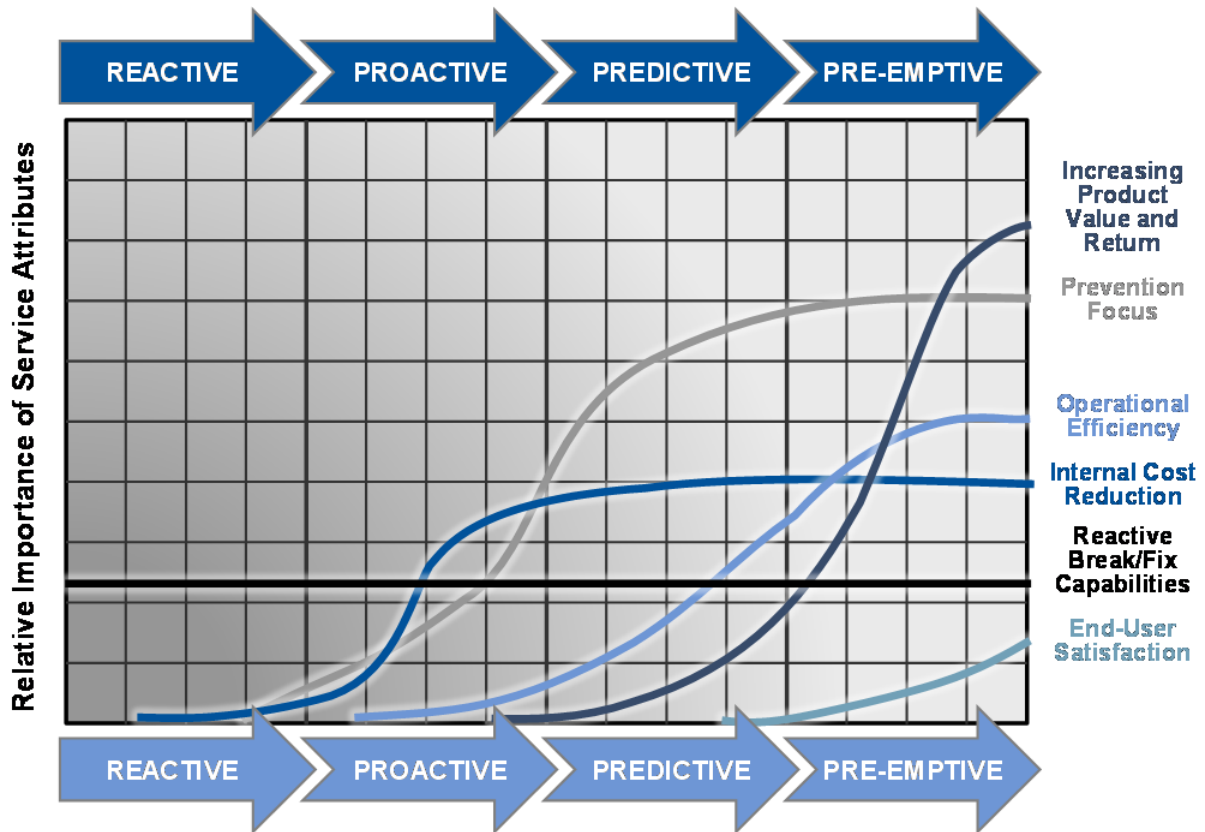
	Reactive	Proactive	Predictive	Pre-emptive
Proportion of Market	85%-90%	10%-15%	0%	0%
Incident Focus	Minimizing downtime following an incident/rapid service restoration	Mitigating the effects of incidents/making incidents less likely	Identifying when and why incidents will occur	Ensuring they do not occur at all
Prevention Focus	Prevention is impractical	Prevention is theoretically possible	Prevention is a reality	Unplanned outages are extremely rare
Interaction Focus	Streamlined customer interaction — minimizing contact time	Provision of information to enable customer to help themselves	Ongoing relationship building and knowledge capture	Understanding the business better — maximizing contact time
Service Metrics	Responsiveness targets	System availability targets	Total quality of service measures	Return on support investment
SLA Penalties	No penalties — best endeavors only	Punitive penalty systems for nonperformance	Investment funding pools and overperformance rewards	Shared risk and return models
Level of Analytics	After-the-fact reporting (bar charts and pie charts)	Crude trend analysis (histograms)	Real-time statistical process control (control charts)	Cost of failure vs. cost of prevention analysis
Automation Deployed	Minimal — some data gathering tools and case submission assistance	Event monitoring to track key system attributes and help improve responsiveness	Continuous real-time monitoring including end-to-end transaction measurement	Automated provisioning and reconfiguration capabilities to enable the provider to guarantee availability
Nature of Relationship	Combative/blame vulture	Performer and audience — information provision and consumption	Collaborative/inclusive	Symbiotic/shared values and interconnected objectives
Level of Customer Involvement	Infrequent	Periodic	As dictated by system events	Continuous
Value Improvements Delivered	None	Some guidance on best practices and operational recommendations	Resource optimization and system viability assessments	Promotion of product capabilities based upon actual product use and peer experience

Source: Gartner (February 2010)

3.0 Business Value and the Product Support Maturity Scale

The 10 evaluation criteria selected were deemed most relevant to current and future support delivery models. Each of these evaluation criteria permeates across all four support maturity levels, and for any service offering under scrutiny there will be numerous corroboratory data points and observable evidence to ascertain how well they are addressed. However, if individually considered, the 10 criteria will not necessarily indicate the business value derived from a specific service or maturity level. The value delivered will be a net result of the performance across all 10 areas. Figure 2 shows how the relative importance of each of the business drivers is likely to shift as support service maturity increases.

Figure 2. Key Support Value Drivers and the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale



Source: Gartner (February 2010)

As one would expect, reactive services are heavily reliant upon their break/fix credentials to demonstrate value. But as services move toward a more-proactive approach, concepts such as internal cost of maintenance reduction become paramount, and the long journey toward incident prevention begins. As predictive services are delivered, prevention-based methodologies will mature, and the focus will once more shift to operational efficiency improvements, and the beginnings of value-based models will emerge. Pre-emptive services will see operational efficiency as a goal plateau, and the need to be able to increase the level value and return received from one's technology investments will be critical.

4.0 Core Maturity Evaluation Criteria

The following listing describes how the service characteristics and capabilities, as defined within Table 1, are used to evaluate the relative maturity of any particular service offering:

- **Incident focus** — A measure of how customer incidents are managed throughout their life cycle. Less-mature incident management processes tend to focus solely on the rapid restoration of service to the detriment of forensic investigation, whereas more-mature processes balance the speed of service restoration with the need to mitigate the effects of the failure and the capture of data necessary to avoid the issue recurring. Indicators of maturity would include the presence of predefined response plans; parallel processing of technical assignments, that is, issue swarming; the use of situational analysis techniques, such as the Kepner-Tregoe methodology; and the presence of automated diagnostic tools to eliminate common causes.
- **Prevention focus** — The degree of attention paid to, and the level of effort associated with, avoiding technical issues or service impacting events within customer environments. Incident prevention is one of the key areas for any mature support service. Prevention is not trivial and requires considerable investment in underpinning technologies and intellectual property to reach a level whereby service levels and availability may be assured. Indicators of maturity would include the presence of failure mode analysis tools, the support function being incorporated into the product development life cycle, the provision of best-practice guidance for routine internal maintenance or housekeeping activities. Ultimately, however, the proof of the prevention success is determined by the mean time between failures experienced by customers.
- **Interaction focus** — For years, support providers have based their internal interaction metrics and performance targets on consumer-facing call center best practice from the 1980s. The reasoning being that interaction with the support function is a result of a product failure; therefore, the interaction should be as quick and painless as possible. While the absence of pain is always a good thing, the assumed necessity to answer calls overly quickly and get off the line as soon as possible may not always be appropriate in a technical support environment. Consistency of interactions, the continuation of a previous relationship and recognition of the need to take time to cover all the possible contributing factors are indicators of a mature support organization.
- **Service metrics** — Who really cares if a vendor calls them back within the agreed-on response time target if the call is just to say that they are still working on the issue? Responsiveness targets exist because vendors were comfortable that they could meet them most of the time. While they do address the thirst of customers for information, they do little or nothing to improve the level of service value a customer receives. Mean time to resolution targets and mean time between failure objectives and system availability metrics require the vendor to consider the consequences of its actions or inactivity. More-mature support organizations can be identified by their use of a variety of service metrics, in parallel, that help drive service improvement rather than enabling them to claim conformance to their own self-imposed targets.
- **SLA penalties** — It is often said that a service delivery metric without a penalty is like a guard dog without teeth, insofar as it can make a lot of noise but doesn't have the ability to do anything to prevent an intruder gaining access. The vast majority of vendor SLAs are currently based upon a "best endeavors" level of effort. Unless service providers are willing to make a serious effort, there will always be the potential for them to let operational performance slip in certain circumstances if their business drivers require them to focus upon areas other than service delivery. SLA penalties can be used to

drive behavior; they have a role, provided that they are set at the right level; too low and the provider will not care, but too high and the deal may collapse.

- **Level of analytics** — Statistical analysis aimed at service improvement and incident prevention is rare within the support market. More often than not, analytics stop at the bar chart on the support manager's wall. Even more-mature support organizations often concentrate on high-level trend analysis for academic interest or workload planning, rather than using it to reach out to help specific customers avoid potential problems. Indicators of maturity would include the use of comparative analysis, customer-specific trend identification, predictive analytics and real-time statistical process control methodologies.
- **Automation deployed** — Although rule-based systems monitoring and event management tools have been in existence for a long time, support automation is still a relatively immature discipline. Currently, the level of automation deployed ranges from data collection wizards to facilitate easier ticket submission to intelligent diagnostic routines that search for known issues based upon compatibility conflicts and configuration errors. In the area of fault remediation, remote control tools have been utilized for a long time, with support representatives able to access their products and diagnose the problem and, indeed, rectify the issue without leaving their desks. Moving forward, embedded monitoring tools, self-diagnostics and self-healing solutions will undoubtedly emerge and change the nature of support operations significantly.
- **Nature of relationship** — Historically, support providers assumed that they knew more about the products they were supporting than did their customers. The complex and interconnected nature of IT has meant that this base assumption can no longer be relied on. Certainly, some customers are less able than others. But tomorrow's support organization must be flexible and humble enough to be able to recognize and accommodate the various needs of its customer base if it is to avoid being heavy handedly condescending or directing its guidance over the heads of its users. Customer profiling will become increasingly important, as will the creation of content aimed at various levels of technical understanding. The transition from preaching to the uninitiated to collaboratively working with peers will not be easy for some.
- **Level of customer involvement** — For some support providers, their customers are little more than unpaid, and often untrusted, pairs of hands to do their bidding while they send out instructions from afar. Customers are engaged only when there is a problem. And there is an assumption that a quiet customer is a happy customer. Indeed, nothing has surprised vendors more in recent times than to have seemingly happy customers cancel support contracts without a qualm due to external pressures. Mature support services will seek to engage their customers in an ongoing dialogue regarding their technology investment. The communication will be regular, free and bidirectional, with each party able to examine difficult questions of the other without fear of jeopardizing the commercial relationship.
- **Value improvements delivered** — The provision of technical guidance on the operation of a particular product is a given. Support providers looking to differentiate themselves or the products that they support must go beyond mere technical support if they are to truly add value. How can the supported product be used more smartly? How can the benefits received from its use be increased? What are the best practices related to its use? These are the questions that support providers need to address. Support providers must extend their reach beyond their traditional audience within the internal technical support functions of the IT department and engage with end users and management within their customers' lines of business if they are to avoid the constant price pressure

that they face now. Only by adding value and demonstrating that they understand the needs of their customer's business will they be able to become a trusted advisor.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Organizations looking to reduce their support-related spending are advised to consider the indirect, as well as the direct, costs of support. Service providers have a role to play in the reduction of the total cost of support; however, organizations must also play their part if they are to successfully minimize these costs. The following outlines some of the ways in which organizations should work with their support service providers as well as the actions that they should take on their own:

- Get someone external to the technical function to review existing support arrangements and identify opportunities to leverage vendor offerings more effectively. Technical folks often lose sight of their basic objective. Being too close to a subject can blind even the brightest individuals to the obvious. Many people have assumed (sometimes wrongly) that their support providers haven't improved their service offerings in many years. When analyzing a particular support offering and your internal arrangement related to its use, you should consider:
 - Are there any opt-in services available that you are not making use of? If so, why is this? Have you tried them in the past? What were your experiences?
 - How frequently do you visit or participate in peer-to-peer community forums? Who receives vendor newsletters and technical alerts? What do they do with them? Are prevention-based recommendations implemented? If not, why not?
 - Who deals with the external support organization? The IT organization? Purchasing? Is it always the same people? When did they last receive any education of the support offerings? How are the internal support team incentivized? Do their incentives promote the types of behaviors that the organization wants? Keep in mind that purchasing organizations usually focus on price, and not necessarily value. IT may have to help them understand the difference.
 - How well do you believe that the support provider understands how you use its product(s)? Do they understand how important they are to your business operations?
- Calculate the total cost of support for your business-critical systems and infrastructure first. Do not worry too much about being exact; a rough order of magnitude estimate should be sufficient to identify the first wave of opportunities for improvement. When calculating the total cost of support, the following areas should be considered:
 - How many people do you have supporting each system? How does this compare with the vendor's guidance? If there is no guidance, ask them why there isn't?
 - How much are you paying for your internal support staff? How does that compare with the relevant market rates? How much training are they getting? Are you supplementing your internal team with subcontractors?
 - How many failures do you have per week/month/quarter/year? How many hours of productivity are lost? How many person-hours are used to investigate these failures? How much rework is required? What is the opportunity cost associated with system unavailability?

- How are routine maintenance activities being handled? Are maintenance windows being consolidated? What levels of spares are being held? How much operational time is lost due to planned maintenance activities?
- How much time and money are you spending on vendor and contract management?
- Challenge your support providers to add value to your business. Explain that you are interested in making the best use of the services that you have contracted for. Request concrete examples of how they will help you address all the key support value drivers:
 - Reducing the internal costs of maintenance — How can the provider help you to avoid unnecessary work? What are their recommendations on the ideal makeup and staffing levels of your internal support function? Have they any automated tools to reduce the manual workload associated with case submission? Does the provider have any automation to reduce or eliminate the workload associated with work-around/fix application or fix testing? Will the provider perform activities on behalf of its customers rather than requiring you to do it yourselves? Are current SLAs the most appropriate for every environment? Are some environments, such as test and development, candidates for reduced SLAs?
 - Promoting prevention-based approaches — Does the provider conduct historic trend analysis to identify subsets of its customer base that are potentially susceptible to specific issues? Does it publish this? If not, why not? Is there guidance on condition-based maintenance schedules? Are details of failure mode analysis available? What are the best practices for common routine operations? Does the provider recommend event management monitoring policies to be applied and the thresholds/correlation rules to be used to assure availability?
 - Improving efficiency/reducing the level of resource use — What are the provider's top strategies to reduce the number of servers/volume of storage/network bandwidth/total power use/amount of consumables used? Does it have recommendations to optimize license usage for maximum return?
 - Making the solution/product deliver more value — Can the provider offer configuration tips? Are there case studies highlighting alternative applications for the product/solution? Does it promote nontechnical best practices relating to the product or solution? Is it involved with industry bodies or professional trade organizations to facilitate improvements to working practices and procedures? Can they provide guidance on how to extend the useful life of the product/solution?
 - Reducing configuration/enhancement costs — Does the provider maintain libraries of preconfigured workflows, customizations and enhancements? Is predefined metadata available and accessible? Does it provide tips on consolidating maintenance activities to reduce overall downtime? Are product upgrade road maps available to plan the role of equipment and the prerequisite upgrades/downgrades that are necessary or possible to reach such an endpoint configuration? Do version upgrades ship with automated migration scripts?
 - Driving end-user satisfaction — Are performance-tuning recommendations available? Have user experience benchmarks been established to enable you to set user expectations appropriately? Is end-user-focused collateral/content available, such as user productivity hints and tips?

- Ask your support providers to describe their service offerings in terms of the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale and give an indication of the financial and business benefits that one service offers over another.
 - Do they have multiple support service offerings? How do those offerings compare with the criteria defined within the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale?
 - Is there a published support services road map? If not, why not? Does the road map clearly show when specific service features and functions will become available? Does the road map explain when the provider believes it would be most appropriate for you to transition to new offerings and why?
- Require your technical functions to review vendor provided best-practice guidance and explain why it won't work in your environment and/or why it won't save you money. If they are unable to do so, implement it. If they can, go back to the support provider and debunk their claims.
 - Is it because the recommendations were "not invented here"? What is the basis for the skepticism? Have they been tested and found not to be suitable or is it based upon opinion and conjecture?
 - Is the internal support team willing and able to question the validity of the provider's guidance? Is their skepticism based upon fact, opinion or previous experience?
- Aggressively look to reduce the internal costs of system maintenance whenever possible. Enlist your support service providers to help with this challenge. Remember, your own internal support staff may have a vested interest in not changing the current situation.

6.0 Frequently Asked Questions

6.1 What Is the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale?

It is a model that defines four types of support offering with varying attributes and purposes. There is an implied evolution across the maturity scale that indicates how Gartner believes the support service marketplace may evolve. Each service type has a variety of characteristics defined for it. However the boundaries between maturity levels are not likely to be black and white, with reactive services occasionally including characteristics from the proactive service definition and vice versa.

6.2 Why Was the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale Created?

The service classifications are intended to act as a naming convention to help service providers and end-user organizations understand the nature and focus of the services offered and contracted for. In addition to improving communication and enabling more-meaningful discussion regarding the validity and value of product support services, the maturity scale will act as a catalyst within the technical support delivery community and promote innovation and improvements in the levels of service seen.

6.3 What Does Gartner Hope to Achieve With the Product Support Maturity Scale?

The stated aims of the maturity scale are as follows:

- To enable vendors to benchmark themselves against others and what Gartner considers to be good practice
- To help clarify and articulate support value
- To help classify and compare vendor offerings
- To improve the level of understanding of support services
- To drive improvement within the industry as a whole

6.4 When Was the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale Created?

The Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale was first formally published in December 2009 as part of "[Marketing Essentials: How to Convincingly Articulate the Product Support Value Proposition](#)," although its origins date back to June of that year when it was used briefly in a presentation session on controlling support spending at the IT Services and Outsourcing Summit in London.

6.5 How Was the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale Developed?

The maturity scale was developed as the culmination of a variety of research work streams and was based on direct research observations, vendor briefings, end-user inquiries and primary research activities. The maturity scale was reviewed and refined by a number of analysts within Gartner that focus upon the product support services market as their primary coverage area.

6.6 How Will the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale Be Used?

The maturity scale will be leveraged and referenced in a wide variety of research deliverables including market trends, competitive landscapes and emerging technology analyses. It is likely that the maturity scale will also be referenced within vendor ratings as a shorthand mechanism to describe the capabilities of vendor in this area. In addition to these formal Gartner research deliverables, the maturity scale may be used as the basis of a stream of end-user-focused content to educate organizations on the nature of support services and how to derive the maximum benefit from them.

6.7 How Complete Is the Gartner Product Support Maturity Scale?

This first iteration of the maturity scale is intended to act as a benchmark against which vendor and end-user feedback will be evaluated. There is every intention to revise and update the maturity scale as time progresses to ensure that it remains relevant to the market on which it is based and to ensure that it continues to help promote best practice.

6.8 Are Reactive Services Less Valuable Than Proactive or Predictive Services?

It is impossible to answer that question on a general level, because the value of each of the service type will depend on the business requirements of each customer. Organizations that are completely reliant on a specific technology are likely to receive greater benefit from more-mature support services, whereas if the technology is not critical to the business, then it may be better to utilize a less-mature service at a lower price.

RECOMMENDED READING

"Ten Factors to Consider When Looking at Third-Party Maintainers as an Alternative to OEM Support for Hardware"

"Microsoft's Endorsement of Peer-to-Peer Forums Will Change the Support Paradigm"

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