

Dedicated Support

Premise

We've all heard companies claiming to have 24/7/365 support. The question today is what does that really mean? 24/7 support can take the form of a single person with a pager, or it can mean a call center in another country, or it can mean a qualified technician right beside your server ready to act. In a slight departure from our usual video report format, in this video we'll explore the various factors you should look at when assessing a hosting company's support model.

Physical Proximity

Is the person you're communicating with physically in the same building as your server and can they physically touch your server quickly if needed?^[1] If they're on pager, where are they? One thing is absolutely certain. If the person you're talking to isn't physically near your server, either because they're on a pager or working from a call center, there will be delays in resolving most issues.^[2]

Language Barriers

Everyone can relate to the experience of contacting a company and finding the person we're communicating with does not speak English at a level that lets them understand our problem.^[3] This is especially pertinent in the highly technical data center industry where support roles are outsourced overseas. Is the person you communicate with fluent in English? Are they able to communicate technically complex matters accurately? These details make the difference between easy, trouble-free communication and difficult, error-prone communication.

Call Centers

When you request support, are you dealing with a central call center? A trend among larger companies is to move all first-line support to central call centers, often in different geographic regions from the data center.^[4] By call center, we're not just

referring to telephone support call centers but all centralized support offices including those dealing with tickets and email. While call centers ensure that there will almost always be someone available to engage you, they also ensure that that person will almost never be able to help you. The purpose of a call center is to try to resolve your problem without involving higher-paid technical people. The actual result is often that you have to explain your problem to someone who clearly doesn't understand it, and try desperately to convince that person to escalate it to someone who can actually help you, something they've been trained to resist.

Message Takers

Is the person you communicate with technically competent or is that person relaying messages to a technically competent person who will then resolve your problem? The message taking approach has advantages to the company providing support, but almost no advantages to the person receiving support. In such cases, the client must hope that the message taker, who is not technically knowledgeable, will manage to relate the problem in a useful way, failing which there will usually be significant delays in achieving resolution as back-and-forth communication takes place through the middleman.^[5] Another irritating side effect to the message-taking approach is that the client is often required to answer a long list of questions from a script, such as their operating system, browser and other details, even when those things clearly have nothing to do with their problem.

The First 24/7 Question

Is the support department available to you 24/7/365? Servers don't tend to fail only during business hours.

The Real 24/7 Question

Are there technically competent people on site at your data center 24/7/365? It's not enough for the support department to be open. What you really need is for technically competent people to be on staff, on site, 24/7/365.

Tools-Stock-Expertise

Does the support department have, on site, all necessary tools, supplies, replacement parts and expertise to solve hardware problems quickly? If something fails, do they

usually have a replacement in stock? Do they have the tools needed to replace it? Do they have the know-how to fix it?^[6] Highly skilled staff are useless without the right tools and supplies, and tools and supplies are useless without highly trained staff.

Security

When a support request is made, will the support department ensure that only people you have authorized have the ability to request service or information on your server? Are you quickly able to manage who those authorized people are, and to withdraw permissions if needed? In the real world, people come and go, and circumstances change quickly. A trusted employee one day can sometimes become a disgruntled former employee the next day^[7], and in order to manage such real-world situations, a client has to have the tools available to add, edit and delete permissions on all authorized users on their account.

Access

Can you access support wherever you are? Servers fail at all times of day and night, often when you're on the road, on vacation or out to dinner.^[8] If you're not at a computer, are you able to get support? Are you able to monitor your server's status from anywhere? Does your data center give you smart phone access to their support ticket system? These tools might seem like toys at first glance, but mobile access to support systems can often save hours of downtime.

Logging

An effective and reliable audit trail encourages the successful resolution and analysis of support incidents. When you contact a company's support department, is the entire incident logged from initial reporting to resolution? Can you access and copy those logs easily? Can these logs be changed by anyone, including the hosting company's staff? A good support system should have full logging of all access to a client's account, including all support incidents, and should never be editable by anyone.

Accountability

The best part of any support incident is resolution. The question is, who determines if an issue is resolved, you or them? A client-focused support system should always let the client decide if an issue is resolved. It's credible for the support technician to

report that the ticket is resolved from their perspective, but final resolution and closure of a support ticket should always be the prerogative of the client. It should be noted, however, that almost all ticketing systems will expire a ticket after a period of inactivity, even if the client hasn't resolved it.

Summary

Almost every data center claims to have 24/7 support. The challenge faced by internet businesses lies in determining whether that 24/7 support will actually resolve most problems or whether they should be prepared for lengthy periods of downtime when support issues occur. It is our hope that this video will assist you in ascertaining that.

Footnotes

- [1] Peter Hannaford, "Will your next data center job be overseas?," www.datacenterdynamics.com, March 2 2013, <http://www.datacenterdynamics.com/blogs/peter-hannaford/will-your-next-datacenter-job-be-overseas>
- [2] Jack Wallen, "10 Problems with Outsourcing IT," www.techrepublic.com, Accessed on April 18 2017, <http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-problems-with-outsourcing-it/>
- [3] David Jastrow, "What You Need to Know About Call Center Outsourcing," <http://www.destinationcrm.com>, November 2003, <http://www.destinationcrm.com>
- [4] "The Trouble with Overseas Call Centers," www.contactcenterquips.com, Accessed on April 18 2017, www.contactcenterquips.com/featured/the-trouble-with-overseas-call-centers
- [5] Diane Schaffhauser, "Research Trends in Data Center Outsourcing," www.sourcimgmag.com, Accessed on April 24 2018, www.sourcimgmag.com/research-trends-in-data-center-outsourcing
- [6] Edward Sullivan, "Finding and Keeping Good Data Center Employees," www.facilitiesnet.com, November 2008, www.facilitiesnet.com/outsourcing/article/Finding-and-Keeping-Good-Data-Center-Employees-10062#
- [7] Cheryl Conner, "The Power of the Disgruntled Employee," www.forbes.com, November 23 2012, www.forbes.com/sites/cherylsnapconner/2012/07/23/the-power-of-the-disgruntled-employee
- [8] "How to Offer 24/7 Customer Support & Why it Matters," <https://www.alldaypa.co.uk/>, Accessed on April 18, 2018, <https://www.alldaypa.co.uk/blog/24-7-customer-service/>