Building and Operating a Network Operating Center (NOC) and Help Desk

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A guide for MSPs and IT solution providers.

With so many new technology opportunities in the market today, managed services providers (MSPs) need to be careful not to overlook the importance of delivering exceptional customer service.

The network operating center (NOC) and help desk services are the foundation of your business and its ability to meet client commitments and service level agreements (SLAs).

The NOC serves as the central nervous system of the MSP, providing connectivity and a physically secure facility for monitoring and managing client IT systems. It must also offer redundancy, remote administration tools, and secure access to customer data. The NOC separates a mature MSP from the rest. It provides greater levels of accountability and assurance because it is easier to track work performed.

Your help desk manages critical customer interactions and acts as the face of your business. If managed effectively, these services enable you to mitigate risk so you can consistently provide a reliable IT environment to clients and ensure monthly recurring revenues for your business.

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Chapter 1

In the age of Cloud computing,

is a NOC still needed?

The advent of Cloud computing has only served to make NOCs and help desk services more important.

The Cloud gives MSPs more control over client systems because the servers can be managed from anywhere.

MSPs can actually reduce physical and labor costs by performing work online and the NOC ensures everything stays on track. In fact, the Cloud has given MSPs an opportunity to expand client services because most SMBs do not fully understand all of the capabilities and technologies the Cloud makes possible.

MSPs have many choices to make when building and operating a NOC and help desk. This eBook will examine several models and provide a checklist of items you need to consider when exploring your options. Whatever choice you make, it is important to first define your operational and service level needs in order to choose the model that best fits your business.

Chapter 2

What are my options

when building a NOC and help desk services?

In the past, building a NOC was an expensive undertaking. It required many large physical investments—from the purchase of a site, to the server hardware, and more—to construct a data center. Plus, when systems were distributed among clients, the service provider would not know for sure if clients were performing the tasks that were asked of them.

Today, MSPs and other IT solution providers can use the NOC as more of a service offering than in the past. The Cloud has made the NOC even more important and easier for MSPs to operate, than ever before, because it gives the MSP more control over the client environment

to ensure nothing goes wrong. "In the age of managed services, it's about being proactive…it's more important now than it's ever been, even in the Cloud environment. The customer is paying up front and has established an expected service level. Without the NOC, your service model falls apart. You have to have something in place that's running 24 hours a day if you're going to be a MSP," notes Craig Fulton, senior business consultant at ConnectWise.[1]

A recent IPED Channel Research survey found that fewer than one third of MSPs had a full service NOC or data center in place and only 6% planned to invest in an onsite, full-scale NOC or data center.[2]

NOC/HELP DESK MODELS

There are four NOC and help desk models that are available to MSPs, and each comes with unique pros and cons.

Full 24x7
This model is decreasing in popularity mainly due to its high price tag and lengthy time to design and implement. However, this option is easy to manage and offers a high availability of resources.

Part Time
A part time NOC and help desk offers a lower cost option and is easy to manage. This model can cause scheduling issues and difficulty with rotating staff availability.

Part Time with Pager Alert System
A common choice among smaller MSPs, this model provides accountability through an audit trail system. In order to achieve the greatest success, companies must have processes in place so that the response system does not fail.

Full 24x7 Using Third Parties
Though this model offers round-the-clock service, it has been challenging for MSPs to implement because of localization and customer service issues. Problems occur when the third party can't relate to the customer or does not have a vested interest in resolving issues quickly.

Today, there are many lower-cost options available to acquire outsourced NOC services. You can purchase an offering from third party vendors to rent rack space and distribute a virtual NOC. The large data centers are already there and have assumed the risk. And your company can work virtually through VPNs and even use mobile phone apps to run RMM tools. "IPED's report goes on to suggest that in fact, IT solution providers just beginning to build a managed service practice may find it more practical to build mindshare and business as an MSP by choosing the right NOC services partners and third-party remote monitoring tools, before making a wholesale investment in their own infrastructure." [5] There is a lot of competition in the NOC market and MSPs can choose from software companies, distributors, or Master MSPs.[6]

One third party vendor reports about 45% of the company's NOC services agreements are 24X7 and less than 10% of the help desk services are 24X7. "We recommend the 24X7 for NOC services for all customers but generally do not see a need for the 24X7 help desk services," said Do IT Smarter President Lane Smith.[7]

CHECKLIST

Checklist for NOC and Help Desk Success

When building your NOC/Help desk, make sure you ask these questions from the UCS Certification checklist[3] :
1. What are the physical access and security controls of both systems and human personnel?
2. What levels of power redundancy are in place to ensure uptime?
3. What levels of connectivity redundancy are in place?
4. What is the business continuity plan?

Other considerations[4] :
1. What does the customer on boarding process look like?
2. Where is the NOC located?
3. Does the NOC follow ITIL standards?
4. What is the escalation process? Is it integrated with your PSA (professional services automation) tool?
5. What is the SLA?
6. Does the vendor offer secure communication and systems that record all activity?
7. How will you document client site details?
8. Can the NOC partner grow as needed to support future business opportunities?

Chapter 2 What are my options when building a NOC and help desk services?

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Chapter 3

# How to build a successful NOC

and Help Desk services

Before you choose a particular model, it is critical that you define your organization's specific needs first so you can find the right solution.

Joe Panettieri of MSP Mentor notes, "Regardless of your help desk choices, it's time for MSPs to get back to basics. Cloud is sexy. Mobility is cool. But an effective help desk — backed by carefully tracked performance metrics — can turn your customers into raving fans. And weak help desks can send your customers running for the exits."

It is important to define clear service and operational level needs and understand the role your NOC will play for your organization including:

- Acceptable response times and resolution plan
- System availability needs – what is critical to your organization and customers?
- Severity, impact, and priorities
- Ongoing measurement and management of service levels with customers and vendors
- NOC is not a replacement for your engineers and technicians[8]

In order to successfully manage your NOC and help desk operations, MSPs can rely on a Professional Services Automation (PSA) solution to automate service workflows. A PSA solution fully integrates help desk tickets, managed services, SLAs, dispatching, time, expenses, and more to streamline IT services.
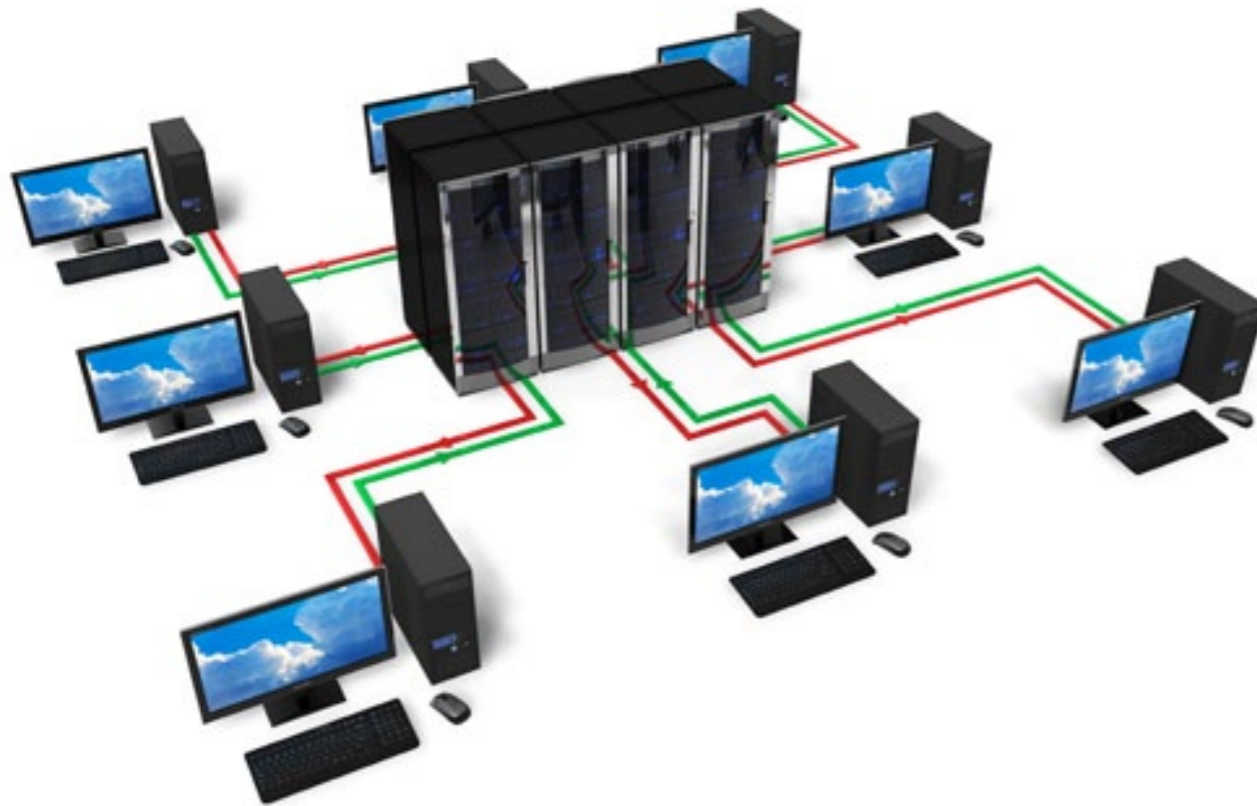
Conclusion

Delivering exceptional customer service is imperative to your business. When building and operating your NOC and help desk services, first make sure you define the needs of your business so that you can meet your service level agreements (SLAs) and operational level agreements (OLAs). The NOC should be functional, physically secure, and offer reliable uptimes. Your NOC and help desk do not have be 24X7, they simply must meet the needs of your clients to be successful.

During the building process, make sure you integrate your tools with a PSA solution so you have a detailed audit trail of service, and trouble ticket resolution, and so you can achieve greater efficiency. With proper planning, MSPs and other IT solution providers can implement a NOC and help desk that builds trust and loyalty with clients. And as an essential component to your clients' success, your business will grow.

[1] Craig Fulton, "Building and Operating a NOC or Help Desk: It's Easier Than You Think," Webcast presented by MSP Alliance, November 1, 2011.
[2] IPED Channel Research Consulting and Education, Quick Look, June 2011.
[3] Fulton.
[4] Joe Panettieri, "Six Questions MSPs Need to Ask NOC Providers," MSPmentor, posted June 24, 2010.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Panettieri, "Six Questions MSPs Need to Ask NOC Providers."
[7] Panettieri, "24x7 Help Desk and NOC Support: Deeper Perspectives for MSPs," MSPmentor, posted February 7, 2011.
[8] Panettieri, "Six Questions MSPs Need to Ask NOC Providers."

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