Options for Providing Help Desk Service

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ABSTRACT: *User productivity is directly proportional to the level of support they receive. No matter how good and accessible the documentation is, users often require, and prefer, the support of a help desk. Cray Research offers its expertise and experience to help our customers meet the challenge of providing a high level of expertise across a wide range of platforms and software. Through a Help Desk Service from Cray Research, customers can offer a higher level of expertise, on a broader range of Cray products, than they might otherwise be able to afford to offer to their users. This talk reviews the challenges of providing help desk services, and explores the options to addressing them.*

It's getting more and more expensive to support users; and budgets are not growing as fast as the complexity of the users' environments. Users often have access to, questions about, and problems with, a formidable array and a great variety of computing platforms. It's unreasonable to believe that one person would be able to handle all types of questions on all of those platforms. It may also be unreasonable for an organization to put enough resources into user support to supply a sufficiently high level of expertise on all the platforms to which their user community has access. Cray Research is investigating ways in which it can offer the benefits of its expertise to its customers to lower support costs and/or to increase the level of expertise available to users.

Employee productivity is the bottom line for both public and private enterprises. A lot of money is spent each year on capital equipment and employee education to try to provide the tools and skills that will increase productivity. But, when the tools are computers and networks, the scenario isn't as simple as buying a tool (a lathe maybe), training the user (or operator maybe), and expecting profit from increased production (more widgets per day). If computers are an important instrument of workers' productivity, the "noise" they experience is the continuous stream of advisories and notices about upgrades and revisions, not the hum of a lathe. The physical appearance of their workstations changes periodically, but electronic environments change in accordance with their desire, or need, to make use of the most powerful tools available. In many cases that means change is constant and the challenge of keeping user skills current is formidable.

Training is a great way to get acquainted with new features, applications and environments, but most courses don't even claim to bring the participants up to the top of the learning curve. After the class, or the on-line tutorial, the learning continues and often the frustration begins. The ideal situation is have someone close by who already knows exactly how to do what needs to be done. Even if time is taken for formal training, and on-line help is available, there are always those half remembered commands, foreign processes and unfamiliar steps. A quick reminder, or verbal walk though can save hours of clumsy work-arounds and frustrating repeated attempts. Then, of course, there's the changes and upgrades for which training isn't practical.

The next best thing to having a knowledgeable and patient person down the hall, or in the next cubical, is having a number you can call be get a hold of such a person. That's the idea behind a help line. By gathering a group of people with strong, current technical skills and giving quick access to them to all of the users, the carpet in the halls won't wear as fast. All that is required of the help desk staff is: expertise on all aspects of all users' environments, good communications skills, the right temperaments, general intelligence, strong problem solving skills, willingness to take responsibility and follow up, and a lot of flexibility. Of course, that's not an easy order to fill even if the budget is ample and the workload is constant.

Cray Research recognizes that user support is a vital part of the overall investment in high performance computing. It continues to try to make its systems easy to use and easy to learn to use. User interfaces, complete environments, and on-line information have changed the face of supercomputing, but there will probably always be both the need and the desire on the part of the user to ask someone a question or get some help from a real person. We want to help our customer bring down the cost of that aspect of their businesses as well.

Cray Research wants to work with its customers to tackle the problems of costly help-desk operations. We don't expect to be able offer a final answer to the challenges of long hours to support widely dispersed users, and of attaining and retaining great expertise in a multi-vender environment. We want to propose that Cray Research expertise and experience can be made available to present a new option in making in-depth knowledge accessible to our customers' end-users. It may make economic sense to link an existing help-desk into Cray Research expertise. In other cases, a link to Cray Research might be an enabling alternative for customers with too few users, or too small a need for Cray support, to justify the cost of the providing the depth and scope of coverage that those users' environments require in the traditional call-center fashion.

We look forward to extending our partnerships with our customers by providing cost effective alternatives for user support.