



## Special Report

### Support Your Local Help Desk

*Economists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University recently published research which concludes that the types of jobs in the United States that will be less likely, if not immune, from replacement by computer software, or to be sent overseas, to be performed by educated lower-cost workers, will be non-routine jobs that require a lot of human interaction – “face to face” communications.*

*Particularly vulnerable in the current employment environment have been product support – “help desk”- centers that are often the first of the technology industry jobs to be moved to off-shore locations, such as India, Ireland, or Matamoros. For these workers and the customers, there has been, in some situations, a dramatic impact upon the vendor- customer relationship, and individual lives, which has led to unexpected consequences.*

The American-French journal **Psychologically Fragile**, recently published the results of a poll of American marriage counselors, which revealed a steady increase in cases of “inner child labor/ codependency relationships” between the help desk personnel of certain major computer manufacturers and customers. In almost all cases, the computer manufacturer had either informed employees it intended to move support operations offshore, or had already done so on a limited basis, and now intended to expand the move.

“When customers call support they are often frustrated and vulnerable,” said Dendro Polly-Epis a Durham, North Carolina therapist. “Maybe they have, for example, to install or use software to prepare a report that’s already late. Maybe it’s a combination hardware and software issue with an enterprise web server in a situation where every minute of downtime means lost transactions. In such situations, they are dependent upon the vendor’s support personnel, and the help people know it. But at the same time when you’re threatened with the loss of your customer support job in a market area that offers little chance of obtaining an equally paying job, you reach out for any way to hold on to what you have. As a result, sometimes they hold on to each other in ways that aren’t always healthy.”

“I thought I was just being patriotic trying to help Bret,” said Emily (not her real name), a system administrator for a chain of mid-west hospitals. “One thing led to another. Now we have a deep spiritual connection. And we’re still using the original support incident number. We just build on the problems I had installing Oracle 11G R2 on Linux. Basically the more things that go wrong the closer Bret and I have become. I find faults everywhere. I don’t want his job to go to India. I

need him in my life. He truly understands my frustrations and needs – this is way beyond just talking about at work now. Basically, nothing works right now. My marriage doesn't work ... sometimes it takes three to make a relationship work."

Gina Romantica, a trainer-advisor to the Product Support Professionals of America (PSPA), provides guidance to association members negotiating the difficult path of trying to protect their employment while not running afoul of U.S. discrimination laws.

"You just can't approach customers and ask directly, or even indirectly: 'Hi, can I touch you, because if my job requires personal contact it's unlikely that it would be sent to India,' " said Romantica. "With the EEOC sticking their noses in everywhere, it's extremely likely such activities will end up with a complaint of sex discrimination being filed."

"You have to make them want you to touch them," advises Romantica. "Customers' employees have to feel that if your job is shipped to India life for them will not be worth living - in which case you may also have an actual shot at getting their jobs."

Reluctantly, Romantica agreed to describe in general terms some of the methods the PSPA instructs its members to use to foster customer concern about the support person's future. "In addition to solving the actual support problem, a goal of the support person is to make the caller feel that this is more than just an assigned incident number, but that this call is one of the most important things in the world to the support person," said Romantica. "We encourage the help desk staff to work together so that a male caller, for example, is always paired with a female support person."

Using what Romantica calls "imagination support," the caller is asked to imagine that the support person (always of the opposite sex) is sitting a "hairs-breath" away from the caller as they work through the problem. "She might add: 'I'm wearing Obsession today. I may have used too much, I hope you don't mind,'" said Romantica. "Usually they don't." Either a male or female support person might say: " 'I used to be before the camera in adult entertainment, but I went back to school and I've worked hard to get my life together.' " said Romantica. "The caller usually gets the 'picture' and even the most hardened Sun systems administrator softens a bit".

Such methods don't always work. "Some of the callers are kind of, well, geeks with limited social lives," said Romantica, "so they get all worked up if a female support person tells them to imagine that she is sitting close to them in the room. But often expectations can be managed and directed to an after-hours chat room. What's important is that a bond is created. So when the support person mentions that he or she might not be available to help the caller in the future because the help center might be moving to India, the caller internalizes that concern and passes it up the line to managers. Hopefully, it's one more pressure point on the vendor to keep the help center in the States."

To foster a better understanding between customer employees and its members, PSPA has established a number of U.S based chat servers to encourage off-line communications that "puts a face and toned body" to the issue of moving support operations off-shore, and the affects of the move upon individuals.

To some employers, the PSPA chat rooms, or others like them, are mere propaganda mills designed to pressure employers by making them appear un-American, or just plain greedy. “Spreading rumors like ‘IBM considers Jane Fonda’s plea that it move its call centers to Vietnam’ is not helpful to their cause,” said Ronald McArby, a support center design specialist. “The telecommunications industry knows Nam’s phone lines couldn’t handle a hotline for one guy choking on fish sauce, let alone enterprise product support.”

What about the appearance of corporate greed? “Look, when you’ve got coffin dodgers clamoring for their quarterly dividend checks in order to pay for their prescriptions,” said McArby, “we’re supposed to tell them it would have been more, but the expensive support desk is sucking up part of the cash? They are, after all, the owners of the business. Name a business where the owner’s cut isn’t considered first? Well, actually I can, but those company officers are usually indicted.”

➤ To other employers, this is all beside the point. “At any moment, somewhere in the world there is a ‘ryfm’ – I mean a customer who needs assistance,” said Arnold Nugent, a product support manager for a large PC manufacturer. “We support a ‘follow-the-sun model,’ so no matter where the customer is located, they should be able to call a support center and talk to someone who speaks some form of English even if the callers don’t speak English themselves. After all, there is only so much hand holding we can do. But what’s important is that at anytime, anywhere, they can make a call and get a live body. I can’t even do that - of course, I’m married. The fact is we’re in a global market; centralizing product support in the U.S. no longer makes sense. This is only the start. The truth is that lower rung knowledge workers have been commoditized. Hundreds of thousands of them graduate each year from a university somewhere in the world.”

And what happens to the U.S. workers displaced? “People aren’t commodities,” said Romantica. “This undermining of the middle class and the prospects for a decent living in the United States is in many ways a bigger threat to the way of life than Al-Qaeda. Frankly, I’d rather be ‘blow’d up real good’ than groveling for years at a McJob with no prospects for the future. Tell me where do we go after the next level of knowledge work jobs are gone like programming? We’re all going to be plumbers and electricians, or be each other’s mortgage broker? Not without depressing wages in those jobs.”

“I keep hearing about the ‘next big thing’ that will be the engine to create jobs like the Internet boom did,” said Romantica. “So what is it? If it’s not here yet, how are PSPA members, or, for that matter, others supposed to prepare for the future?”

In the meantime, for some, like Emily and Bret, the *next best* thing will do. “The chat room was too confining,” said Emily. “We’re taking my support needs to the next level.” She declined to elaborate.