

Six advantages of a cloud-based help desk for small to midsize businesses



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Introduction

For many startups, their first computer help desk is an actual desk, occupied by whoever is most adept at setting up hardware and tweaking software. Although the function is vital, it may not even be part of the job description at first.

With company growth comes a dedicated help desk. It's staffed by at least one employee and accessible not only at a physical desk, but also through email, phone, and text messages.

But soon enough, the help desk itself needs help. The life raft comes in the form of a help desk application, which provides formal incident tracking with assigned ticket numbers for an overworked staff to follow, escalate, and resolve cases. Call it the next phase of help desk evolution: This is where many small and midsize businesses (SMBs) find themselves.

The help desk solutions available in today's marketplace differ markedly from those of even a few years ago, however. Among the most dramatic technology shifts is where the help desk actually resides—not within the company's walls, but in the "cloud." The next generation of help desk technologies will leverage cloud computing to deliver more proactive, collaborative, versatile services, faster ROI, and enterprise-class disaster-recovery benefits without the associated costs. Just the ticket for SMB success.

Six advantages of putting the help desk in the cloud

What does it mean for a help desk to be in the cloud? A conventional help desk application resides in-house on a client or network server. As with any traditional application, the installation, care, and feeding of the application is the responsibility of the business.

In contrast, a cloud-based help desk resides on third-party servers—accessed through the Internet (the "cloud")—that are professionally maintained. The application is, in fact, an online service. These cloud applications can be accessed from any connected machine, from anywhere in the world using an ordinary Web browser. Typically licensed by subscription, cloud-based applications dispense with the installation and endless upgrade patches that plague most IT departments. When end users sign in, the latest version of the application is already available. That's the case for BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com, which BMC developed on salesforce.com's Force.com cloud platform. (For more about this solution, see the "BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com" sidebar later in this paper.)

Moving the help desk to the cloud creates a much better experience for IT personnel and users alike—one that reflects where the next generation of help desks is headed. A cloud-based solution offers a help desk that provides SMBs with:

1. More proactive service
2. More collaboration
3. More customization
4. More customer services
5. More value, faster ROI
6. More enterprise software features

Advantage #1: More proactive service

The help desk of the future, driven by the cloud, is moving from a reactive service that responds to customer requests to a proactive service that helps customers solve problems on their own. The self-service component reflects a simple realization: Given a choice between quickly resolving a problem themselves and waiting for help to arrive, customers will inevitably opt for fast resolution. Who does the actual resolving is immaterial. For this reason, self-service desks are beginning to look like self-service portals, complete with an in-house knowledge base, FAQs, and other online information that's already a familiar part of online support. And that service puts SMBs on an equal footing.

A cloud-based service desk also broadens this horizon by no longer assuming that the only repository for wisdom is inside the corporate firewall. When a customer does a search, he or she may look not only at a company's knowledge base, but also to a forum or other Web site that may be able to help. If the question is about formatting a presentation slide, for example, the best answer may reside on a third-party forum, where other users have already encountered the same problem and come up with a solution. As we all know from our online experience, the true repository of the world's answers extends worldwide, which makes an SMB look just like a much larger enterprise.

Advantage #2: More collaboration

For similar reasons, cloud-based service desks will also become gateways for social media services, such as Salesforce Chatter. Social media can change the relationship between service desk personnel and their customers by providing a familiar way for people to interact—the same kind of informal, fluid relationships associated with popular sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social media also helps foster collaboration through specialized user communities within a company. These communities can be closed, open, or both: An accounting team might want to share information on travel expenditures across the company, for example, while still maintaining a secure collaboration forum related to an acquisition.

Advantage #3: More customization

In today's help desks, all customers view the same help screen. In the help desk of the future, accounting department staffers will be able to filter out developer applications, and R&D developers won't have to view the status of accounting apps. Such customization is particularly easy in a cloud environment: simply add, subtract, and rearrange links on the intranet launch pad. As more applications reside in the cloud, the service desk portal—itsself a cloud-based application—becomes the principal connection between customers and IT. Conversely, as more help desks reside in the cloud, this fast-filtering capability will encourage IT to license and build more cloud-based applications.

Advantage #4: More customer services

A service desk in the cloud can open up a wide array of opportunities for end-user services. Just as Web-enabled phones have attracted a storm of application development, a cloud computing development platform presents creative possibilities that service desk vendors and their customers have only begun to explore. And just as with the iPhone and Android devices, companies can develop new applications quickly in response to customer demand and IT inspiration.

Many applications can be developed on Force.com using a simple point-and-click approach, with more sophisticated ones employing Apex, Force.com's Java-like development code. This low bar to entry means that self-service personnel with a deep understanding of employees' needs can quickly develop suitable applications. Developers can then make those applications available beyond their company's walls by distributing them on salesforce.com's AppExchange online marketplace. This growing library of cloud applications already includes many that can enrich the environment of an SMB, including Time Off Manager and Recruiting Manager.

Advantage #5: More value, faster ROI

A cloud-based service desk can deliver faster ROI through streamlined installation and management plus lower infrastructure costs.

Building on Force.com

SaaS applications run on a cloud computing platform—and not all platforms are alike. SaaS developers are well aware of this fact. For example, BMC noted several advantages in developing its help desk solution on Force.com:

- **Faster to market and lower cost.** BMC's help desk was developed and deployed in 76 percent less time and required 76–85 percent fewer developer hours, resulting in significant cost savings.
- **Instant, no-effort updates.** With Force.com's multitenant architecture, every customer is upgraded to the latest version of BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com at the same time. This process eliminates the cost, effort, and headaches of buying, configuring, rolling out, and maintaining the latest version of a service desk application on every user's system.
- **Enterprise-grade security.** With a full-time security staff that few SMBs could afford, Force.com complies with the toughest security certifications in the industry, including ISO 27001, SAS70 Type II, and SysTrust. Force.com also provides granular security and sharing rules to let you decide which users see what information, all the way down to the field level. This setup facilitates the delegation of less-critical tasks to less-skilled workers, lowering support costs while ensuring proper levels of security.
- **Ease of deployment on mobile devices.** BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com can be deployed across multiple smartphone platforms, giving remote users and administrators access to the same functions and personalization features as on-site users.

In a traditional on-premises model, the help desk itself often requires considerable help. Technical expertise and time is required to download and install software, configure the database, customize the application, and configure the Internet server. But in the cloud, a service desk administrator simply logs in via a browser and configures the system in a few hours. The time savings: 2 days to 2 weeks, depending on the amount of IT overhead saved.

A cloud-based application also requires less hardware and software infrastructure, so it costs less. The research firm IDC studied 10 companies that used Force.com to develop custom cloud-based applications. The ROI analysis found that on average, these companies realized \$1 million in annual savings due to decreased staff hours spent in application management and deployment.

Advantage #6: More enterprise software features

Another advantage of the cloud for SMBs involves a contradiction inherent in traditional applications. Management software, including the help desk, is every bit as mission-critical to SMBs as to larger companies. Yet those apps often don't provide the expected advantages and safeguards of enterprise-grade applications. The lack of disaster recovery is especially striking, for example. Walk into most SMBs and you're likely to find some of the company's most precious assets—such as its financial, product, and customer data—residing on PCs sitting under desks and in closets. This vulnerability isn't a good idea for a startup, much less a company that's poised for growth.

The cloud provides enterprise-class backup, security, and disaster recovery, but without the usual enterprise cost. Cloud applications are usually licensed on a pay-as-you go basis, with per-seat costs that are commensurate with a company's growth. With this subscription model, up-front costs are typically lower—a prime concern for SMBs.

By putting not just the service desks, but the rest of IT, in the cloud, companies will approach the Holy Grail of help desk support: identifying and resolving issues before end users ever see them. That's especially true for system failure. When a company's own systems go down, so does the company. When failure happens in the cloud, system failover technology automatically moves the application to another server—and customers don't even see the hiccup. System failover is a hallmark of a well-run enterprise IT shop, but until the cloud, such technology was out of the reach of SMBs. Now, they—and their customers—can feel as secure as the big guys.

To find out how your SMB organization can benefit from a help desk in the cloud, please go to bmc.com/force.

BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com

On April 26, 2010, BMC announced BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com, the first cloud-based help desk to provide out-of-the-box ITIL-based incident management, self-service, and inventory management processes. The Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) is a set of best-practice processes that can help companies make better decisions about prioritizing IT issues. ITIL addresses the human impulse to respond first to the first incident in a queue. But the "first-in/first-out" approach doesn't always take the broader needs of the business into consideration. ITIL helps factor in the ever-shifting demands for scarce computing resources—and set priorities accordingly.

BMC ServiceDesk on Force.com can reduce user wait times from minutes to seconds and increase first-call resolution rates from 30–90 percent. The platform streamlines setup through the use of wizard-guided templates. It includes a personalized portal that puts management tools at administrators' fingertips. The platform is easy to personalize and customize, reduces training needs, and speeds time-to-productivity through a simplified user experience. Key advantages include:

- **Fast deployment, low up-front costs.** Key advantages for every cloud-based application.
- **Cloud-based budgeting.** Because the application is paid for via monthly subscription, organizations can better manage their operating budgets.
- **Zero-cost, zero-effort upgrades.** Upgrades are instantly available to every user, with no need to schedule, perform, or test them for each client.
- **Flexible usage.** Scaling the deployment is as easy as changing the number of licenses in use. There's no need to make changes to individual user's PCs, purchase additional hardware, or worry about storage, network capacity, and software licenses when demand increases.
- **Support for easy personalization and customization.** The platform's support for real-time, point-and-click rules development lets an SMB help desk manager adapt the platform to the help desk, not the other way around. For example, it's easy to set new thresholds for escalating a problem or set different escalation policies for different users, groups, times, and dates. No additional programming or expensive specialists are required: Even authorized non-technical users can personalize the interface by adding, deleting, or renaming tabs.



For More Information

Contact your account executive to learn how we can help you accelerate your CRM success.

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