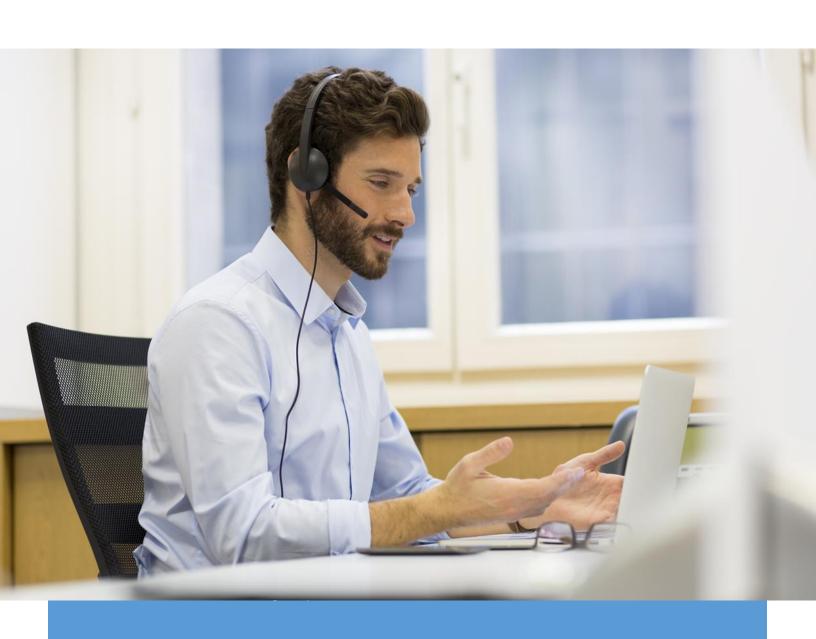# ON-CALL 101

SURVIVING BEING ON-CALL

A GUIDE TO COMPLETE INCIDENT MAGEMENT

Effective management of after-hours on-call needs to be premeditated. That is, the process needs to be thought through and cannot be ad hoc. While most DevOps teams and IT teams have a schedule, they haven't thought through the whole process.

SURVIVING BEING ON-CALL

No one person can (or should) be available 24/7 – everyone needs a break. If you are a part of a small team, take turns being "on call" for service issues. This often means forwarding phone lines to the on-call person's cell phone for the night, or pushing emails to their individual account, this is the worst way to handle incident alerts.

This white paper will show you ways to alleviate the stresses of being on call. Let's start at the very beginning…

BEFORE THE INCIDENT OCCURS

SETTING UP ALERTS

The beginning of an incident is perhaps the point where you have the most control. Most systems that are under your care will send off an alarm if something is not right. Most of these notifications are in the form of email. Emails however are not effective as most inboxes bury important alerts and email tends to be easily ignored. Any system that sends off an email notification should be integrated with a monitoring tool or an alerting app that can be accessed using any smartphone, anywhere.

BE SMART – USE A SMARTPHONE

Smartphones are a godsend to those on-call. The alternative, antiquated pagers, don't have the ability to until the messages are read. Smartphones on the other hand are easily available and can host apps that act like pagers.

There are many pager apps but only OnPage continues to broadcast the alert until it is read so that a response is ensured. Moreover, if the recipient of the smartphone message is out of range when the page is originally sent, smartphone applications can ensure that the notification continues until read. This is not the case with pagers which are often missed if the intended recipient is out of range.

CATALOG EVERYTHING

A seasoned professional draws a lot of information on how to deal with incidents from past experiences. In order to have a catalog of all your clients' past incidents you need to document them and the best way to do that is by using a ticketing system like ConnectWise or Autotask that tracks the progress of the incident and everything that happens to it until it's resolved.

ORGANIZE YOUR TEAM

INVOLVE EVERYONE ON YOUR TEAM

Whether you have a small team or a large one, if your business requires members of your team to work unconventional hours chances are that they are not going to be too happy about this. The key to managing your team for on-call shifts is making sure everyone gets an equal share of the responsibilities while maintaining flexibility. For example if someone has had a long arduous on-call shift then you should give that person a break and shift responsibilities to someone who had a light load on their shift. Also, getting everyone in your team involved fosters collaboration. If someone needs to attend to a personal emergency then someone else on the team can take over. Having this open dialogue about on-call schedules also ensures that everyone is on the same page.

It's management's role to quantify the work done and measure who is taking on little or too much responsibility. The key here is to have management make sure that everyone participates, isn't overloaded and not dictate terms and set a schedule in stone that penalizes people when they can't take it on.

MOVE AWAY FROM THE LAMINATED SCHEDULE – GO DIGITAL

There are apps and software out there that let you digitize a schedule. The downside to having a flexible schedule is its changing nature. The trick to managing this is to have one person on your team be responsible for creating the digital schedule and sharing it with everyone. Ideally you also want to use a digital scheduler that:

- can be changed depending on your teams' circumstances
- can send out alerts to only those who are on call on that particular day
- can program escalations if the first person on-call is occupied

ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN B: HAVE REDUNDANCIES IN PLACE

SET UP AN ESCALATION POLICY

Make sure your team is organized into an escalation policy. An escalation policy ensures that if an incident is not acknowledged or resolved within a pre-determined amount of time, it will be escalated to the correct user(s). You can customize who you want to receive the alert, the amount of time to wait before escalating to the next user(s), and which user(s) the alert should be escalated to. Those who need to receive alerts are put in one escalation group. The order in which the people are alerted should ideally be adjusted according to who on your team wishes to be the first responder. Choose an Escalation Interval (time to escalation) and Escalation Factor (the factor that stops an escalation. Ex: the message being read) to determine how the escalation policy behaves.

SET UP A FAILOVER

In the event an alert is sent to an escalation group and does not reach anyone in the escalation group you need to have a failover in place that notifies either the team leader or the boss so that they can take the right actions. This can be as simple as sending an email with details of the unanswered alerts. In a post mortem of the incident this kind of failover reporting will be useful to track what exactly happed with the alert and why it was left unacknowledged.

PRIORITIZE ALERTS

Anyone who has worked an on-call shift knows that not every alert they receive is critical. To mitigate alert fatigue, it's best to classify each type of alert as high, medium or low priority. High priority alerts are anything that is absolutely critical and must be handled to ensure business continuity. These high priority alerts are also ones that require alerting. Of course, severity of alerts is in the eye of the beholder. What is high priority for one person, might only be a medium priority alert for another. There is no clear, right answer on what is a high versus a medium alert. What is important however is to identify what alerts are which? Furthermore, the mindset should be that high priority alerts are critical notifications that require immediate alerting. Medium and low priority alerts can wait until the next day.

THE POST MORTEM

POST ALERTING

After the alert has been responded to and remediated, you need to look back at the situation and reconsider if the alert was triggered and responded to appropriately. You should ask if:

- o The event was triggered by a real issue or by an issue that could have waited until the following day or by an issue that didn't exist in the first place
- o Was the alert delivered to the appropriate person? If not, was this because the alert was missed or was the person who received the alert unable to handle the issue?
- o Was enough information provided to the person on-call so that they could handle the issue quickly? If not, the alerting information should to be updated so it is more robust.

MEASURE EVERYTHING

The adage is that 'You can't manage what you can't measure.' If you want to effectively improve your response times to incidents, you need to look at historical data. Use a tool that time stamps all critical alerts and integrates that data with the platform. When metrics are immediately available, you'll be able to measure how well your team is doing, and make the necessary changes to ensure you are providing exceptional service.

ABOUT ONPAGE

We hope that these insights make it easy for you to survive your next time on-call. A lot of the tools we mention in this whitepaper are actually features of OnPage: The Complete Incident Alert Management System.

OnPage is a cloud-based, industry leading smartphone application for high-priority, real enterprise messaging. The OnPage application addresses the need for HIPAA compliant, incident response management and secure, time-sensitive messages. OnPage takes mobile communications to the next level with the latest all-in-one app features. The web-based on-call scheduling tool enables enterprise users to plan ahead and route prioritized messages to the right person, at the right time, every time.

 Thousands of healthcare providers, doctors, field engineers, law enforcement, nurses, emergency responders and disaster recovery teams depend on OnPage for rock solid reliability every day.

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT OUR WEBSITE OR CALL: ONPAGE.COM/CONTACT-US 781-916-0040